DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 133 769 CS 203 182

AUTHOR Helbig, Alethea
TITLE Curriculum Planning: Ways to Go.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association, 1976.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *Curriculum Design; Drama; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; Library Science; Literature Appreciation; *Literature Programs; Speech; *Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

The children's literature program at Eastern Michigan University was designed to expand the literary backgrounds of the students, to help students become more familiar with the variety of books published for children and young people, and to prepare students to evaluate books. This program consists of a minor in English with a specialty in children's literature, an interdepartmental (English, speech, and library science) major in literature and drama for the young, and a master of arts degree in English, with a concentration in children's literature. The majority of undergraduate students are prospective teachers, while the majority of graduate students are teachers in service. Response to the program has been enthusiastic. (JM)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED133769

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Alethea Helbig
Eastern Michigan Univ.
3640 Eli Road
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Alethea Helbig

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Curriculum Planning: Ways to Go

Our children's literature program at Eastern Michigan University is an example of how one English Department has responded to the need for more children's literature classes. It consists of a Minor in English with a specialty in Children's Literature, an Interdepartmental Major in Literature and Drama for the Young, and a Master of Arts in English with a Concentration in Children's Literature. Our program is based on the firm conviction that a knowledge and appreciation of imaginative literature are among the most valuable assets that those who work with children and young people can have, both for their own education and for that of the young people with whom they will come into contact.

Our children's literature program rose out of our perceptions of the needs of our students, and also out of our students' own perceptions of their needs. We sought to accomplish two main objectives. First, we wanted to broaden the education of our students, particularly of those going into teaching, so that they would have greater knowledge and appreciation of literature for their own sakes. Many of our students, like students generally, have read very little, and many come from homes where little reading is done. Their literary backgrounds are impoverished. Second, we wanted to help our students become more familiar with the great variety of books published for children and young people and to prepare them to evaluate books so that they would be able to use the best of the old and the best of the new with discrimination. Our traditional English majors and minors helped to meet these needs for some of our students, but many

CS 203182

on the elementary, middle school, special education, or library programs found our period courses too specialized and the English curricula generally toorestrictive for their purposes and interests. As our English programs were set up, there was no way for students to learn more about books for children and young people. And besides, many students had become interested in the subject area of children's literature as a discipline in its own right. So it was to expand the literary backgrounds of our students, as well as to offer new combinations of classes that would apply toward degrees, that our children's literature program was developed.

Historically, our English Department program in literature for children and young people, although small in terms of number of courses, was a strong one. For years, we had been offering two courses. One was an undergraduate survey of books for children and young people in various genres; the other was a graduate course in methods of teaching children's literature. Once primarily a teacher training institution, Eastern Michigan University has traditionally required that all undergraduates on the elementary curriculum complete a course in children's literature, and, to the best of my knowledge, the undergraduate course which has satisfied that requirement has always been offered by our English Department. It has been staffed by English Department faculty who have treated the books as literature, not as the core material for preparing bibliographies or methods projects. Because the undergraduate class has been required on the elementary curriculum, enrollment has been consistently high. Although the graduate class, on the other hand, has always been an elective, enrollment has also been steadily high. This class has been made up mainly of teachers taking it for continuing certification or for an advanced degree through the School of Education, although other disciplines have been consistently represented, too. While the undergraduate course has always had a literary perspective, in recent years

the thrust of the graduate methods course has changed somewhat. Because growing numbers of students entered the class knowing less and less about literature in general and about children's books in particular, the approach gradually began to emphasize literature rather than method. Those teaching the class found that they needed to acquaint their students with important books for children and young people before they could begin to deal intelligently and effectively with methods of teaching the literature.

In the late 1960's, we began planning our undergraduate English Minor with a Specialty in Children's Literature. Right from the start, we agreed that we wanted our minor to be a solid and substantial one, in keeping with the nature and the reputation of the undergraduate class currently being offered. We wanted no shallow and gimmicky courses where students could have fun but come out knowing little about the literature. Since the bulk of our students are prospective elementary teachers who will be certified to teach through the eighth grade, we felt it was important to make sure they studied a selection of the best literature to serve that broad age span as well as their own literary needs. We decided to concentrate on what would be of basic cultural value and on important and classic books which they might use as touchstones in judging other books for children. We were determined to steer away from classes that might prove to be ephemeral or faddish. Courses on such subjects as ethnic literature, film, or the new realism in children's literature we felt could be left to special topics classes offered periodically rather than regularly.

In 1970, our English Minor with a Specialty in Children's Literature was approved, and students began enrolling. Its basic arrangement is the same as that of other minors in our department, with required classes and electives totalling 21 semester hours, that is, seven three-hour classes. Our students, like all other English majors and minors, must take two introductory courses

in English literature, classes which deal with writings that our department feels every college graduate should know. Introduction to Children's Literature, what is now our basic undergraduate course, is also required of everyone on the program. It is a survey course in which students read important works in each of the several areas of literature for children and young people. The minor also provides a choice of courses that are of general cultural interest and importance: Bible as Literature; Shakespeare; American Indian Myths, Tales and Legends; Folk Literature: Gods and Heroes (which is a comparative mythology course); and Folk Literature: Ballads and Folk Tales. The three folklore courses are new, introduced along with the program, while Bible as Literature and Shakespeare have been regular department offerings for many years. All of these courses are intended to broaden the literary backgrounds of our students and to give them a scholarly knowledge of the sources of many books and stories which are important in the study of English literature and which are most frequently adapted for children and young people. A last and very important requirement on the program is Critical Evaluation of Children's Literature, also a newly created course. Critical Evaluation is a course in practical criticism; it provides much needed experience in writing as well as another chance to look closely at literature for children.

Some time after our minor went into effect, interest arose in offering a program combining courses from our department with some from the speech and library science departments. The result was our Interdepartmental Major in Literature and Drama for the Young. This major of 36 semester hours provides more opportunity for students to pursue interests awakened by earlier courses in children's literature and dramatic arts. In addition, this major permits students to elect three classes in library science which prospective elementary and middle school teachers in particular might find useful to them in their work. A cross-disciplinary approach to literature for children, the

interdepartmental major gives students the chance to combine courses from dramatic arts, library, and English in fresh and individual ways.

About the same time that our minor was adopted, we introduced History of Children's Literature as the second of our graduate offerings. All classes on the minor were filling to capacity every semester, and soon both graduate classes were consistently over-enrolled. It was the success of these courses that encouraged us to develop our master's program. Students were requesting more graduate classes and were asking for a unified combination of courses which would lead to a master's degree. Some wanted more classes because they felt the courses would be useful to them in their work and some because they had developed a scholarly interest in the subject as well. The interest in children's literature on our campus seemed to reflect the growing national interest in the field evident in the establishment of the Children's Literature Association and of sections, seminars, and assemblies in the Modern Language Association, the Midwest Modern Language Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English. It seemed appropriate to expand our offerings on the graduate level into a full Master of Arts program.

Our Master of Arts in English with a Concentration in Children's Literature, like our minor, corresponds in arrangement with our other English master's programs. Like them, it holds a scholarly approach to the subject matter and requires the completion of 30 semester hours of graduate work. Students must fulfill a major of twelve hours in children's literature, take twelve hours of electives from any English department offerings for which graduate credit may be given, and complete a six-hour cognate combination. The classes required at present as part of the children's literature major are History of Children's Literature, Teaching of Children's Literature, Major Genres in Children's Literature, and a special topics seminar. The content of Teaching of Children's Literature and of History of Children's

Literature is evident from their titles. Major Genres not only intends to insure an acquaintance with the important works for children in the various areas of children's literature, but also seeks to build critical awareness and to give students an opportunity to pursue special interests as well. Furthermore, since Major Genres is a pre-requisite for Teaching of Children's Literature, it is possible once again to teach the Teaching of Children's Literature as it was originally intended, primarily as a methods class. Other courses which we are thinking of offering, either as regular courses or as special topics classes, include fantasy, modern novel, poetry, biography, writing for children, and teaching children to write. It is still too early to draw conclusions concerning our MA program; it has only just been approved by our Regents. But we have good reason to believe on the basis of interest shown so far that it will be successful in attracting students. Moreover, we are convinced that this MA program, like our minor, is a sound and substantial one which should serve the desired purpose of increasing our students' knowledge and appreciation of imaginative literature.

Who takes these courses? What students are enrolled in our programs at Eastern? The vast majority, of course, on the undergraduate level are prospective teachers, and on the graduate level are teachers in service. A good number of library students are also enrolled, but students from many other disciplines are represented, too. Students from such areas as business, psychology, nursing, occupational therapy, anthropology, law, religion, music, and art are particularly attracted by the courses in mythology and folklore. Some of them see these classes as complementing their programs, while others just want to take what they have heard are interesting literature courses. Almost all of them are upperclassmen, and they tend to be mature in attitude and fairly highly motivated. Some students choose one or two classes because they have jobs as recreation directors, work in bookstores, or have some kind of position which brings them into contact with young people or their

literature. Some take a children's literature class because they are parents and sincerely want to become acquainted with the best literature for young people in order to guide the intellectual and literary growth of their own children.

Our courses were developed with the aim of broadening our students' own literary backgrounds, of giving them materials which they might use with their own students, and of developing their critical sensibilities. How well have we succeeded in meeting these goals? Concrete information of this sort, of course, is very hard to come by. To evaluate, we have had to rely primarily upon what people tell us about our programs and upon our own observations. It is significant, however, that people who teach in our School of Education and who have more occasion to get into the public schools than we do urge their students to enroll and have told us that our children's literature program has been of great value to them. A few public school administrators also have shown approval and have given support. The most enthusiastic response, though, has come from our own students. They have spread the word about the minor to other students, in spite of the fact that by their own admission our program is not easy. In fact, they say it is one of the hardest and most demanding programs on campus. But most of them have come to see the need for knowing something themselves before they can teach and of being readers themselves before they can stimulate enthusiasm for reading. They have come to recognize the value of our program.

On many occasions, student teachers and former students who are now teaching tell us how their own classes are going and what they have been doing with literature with their own students. I teach classes in literature from oral tradition. Seldom a week goes by without some of my former students contacting me in some way. Some write, some call, some drop into my office to talk about how they have been using myths and tales with their own classes. Often, they ask for suggestions for more stories to use or for ways of presenting the

material. Always, they attest to the pleasure their pupils are having with these old tales, to the appeal these old stories hold for all of their students, and to the fun that they themselves are having with them. Frequently, too, they speak about how their outlooks on life have changed since they began studying these old tales. Our students, whose knowledge of this kind of story has been particularly weak, invariably say that they see themselves and the world about them differently for having studied the old, originally oral stories. These experiences of mine with students are not unique; all of us who teach on the children's literature program have them. They support our conviction that our program is sound and is meeting needs. We're proud of our program. That is not to say that we would not make some changes. We undoubtedly shall. We know that flexibility is essential in maintaining a good program. But as it is, it seems to be accomplishing the desired objective of bringing adults, children, and good literature together.